

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON SUENO'S STONE

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The magnificently carved stone on the edge of the town of Forres, known as Sueno's stone, is classified as a Class III Pictish stone. It is 20 feet tall which is 7 times the width of the top of the monument — a point of some interest when we examine the composition of the decorated panels. The stone weighs some 7 tons and was probably first erected in the mid-9th century, to judge by the style of the decorations. Despite its current weathering, it probably lay buried (and protected) for several centuries before it was re-erected in its present position in the early 18th century. I believe that the stone was then put up back-to-front since the cross on the current west-face should have been facing the sunrise or east, like most Christian monuments.

Sacred stones are always perambulated in a sunwise fashion: east-south-west-north-east. Journeying around the stone we are confronted with a whole series of messages. These images are a deliberate attempt by the sculptors to tell a story and that is what we need to discover. In this task we will note the skill with which the whole composition is dominated by the number 7. All four sides of the stone are decorated in panels: the N and S faces are divided into 3 panels each while the E and W faces contain 4 panels — a total of 14 panels.

It will be seen that the 4 panels on the east face correspond *exactly* to those on the west face. If you refer to the sketch (Fig. 5.1, see also Figs. 6.1, 2 and 6 in the following article), then, panel A is opposite the ring-cross, panel B is opposite the cross-shaft, panel C corresponds to the 5 figures under the cross, while there is an uncarved section opposite panel D. It should be noted that panel A is twice the top width, panel B is 3 times the top width while panels C and D equal the top width: the sum total of panels is 7 times the top width. However, the length of the cross (A + B) is 5 times the top width, while at the top of panels A & B are 5 triumphant men. Is this significant?

I have discussed the composition of the panels in my book: *The Symbol Stones of Scotland* (1984). Briefly, panel A has 5 standing figures facing outwards and 8 horsemen, below them, riding from left to right. Now, if my idea is correct that this was originally the western face, then these riders are moving from *south to north!* Panel B, read downwards, has 5 standing figures above two groups of 4 men fighting; next is an execution scene with 7 decapitated bodies to the left of a group of 8 figures who seem to be celebrating this occasion; below the bodies are two pairs of fighting warriors while the bottom of the panel has 6 horsemen followed by 8 warriors, moving from south to north. Panel C depicts a tent (?) beneath which are a further 7 decapitated prisoners while all around are 8 pairs of

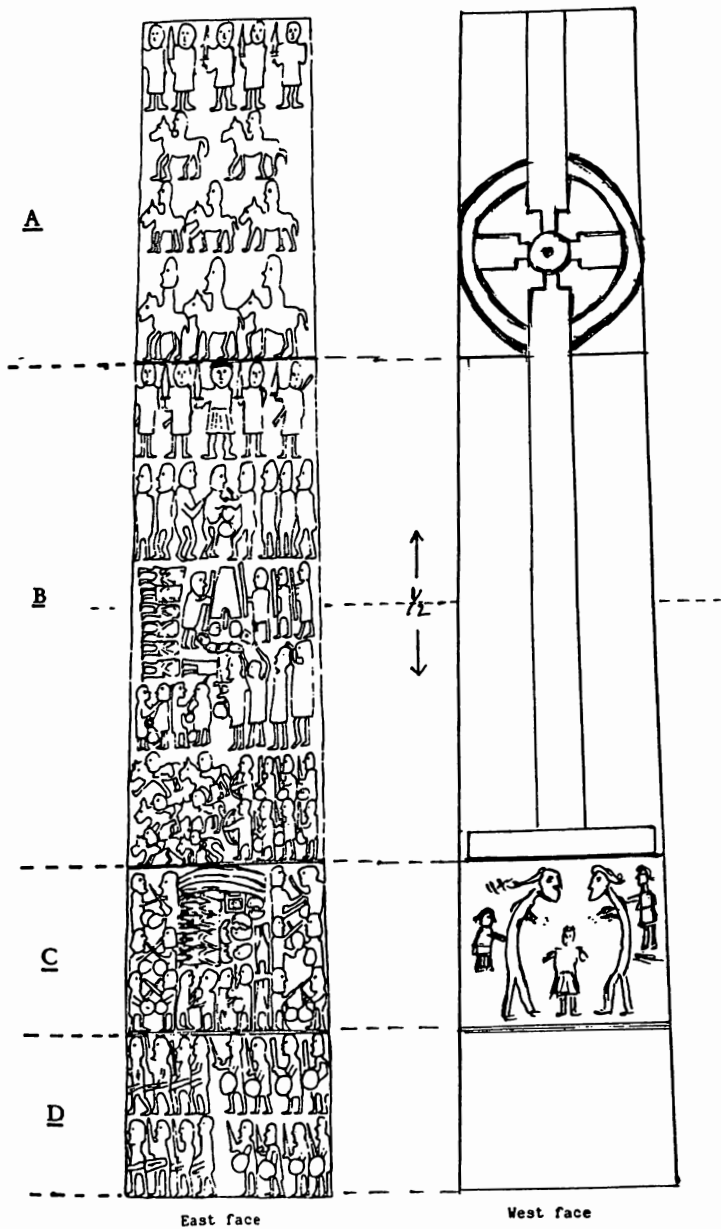


Fig.5.1 Sueno's Stone (author's sketch).

fighting warriors. Panel D shows two groups of 4 warriors pursued by two other groups of 4 warriors holding spears and shields, moving from south to north.

It is clear that this stone commemorates the victory of the *southerners*, given my reading, and the corresponding defeat and execution of the *northerners*. I demonstrate in my book that if we divide the contending parties into two factions: left and right, then there is a total of 42 (7×6) to the left, losing side, and a total of 56 (7×8) for the winners. The grand total is thus 98 ($= 7 \times 7 \times 2$), including the 14 executed prisoners. As far as the living are concerned we find that the southerners outnumber the northerners by 2:1, actually 56:28. The reasons, I suggest, have to do with the composition of the two armies which are probably the Picts and the Scots.

The question arises why this stone was placed here at Forres? At that time, Forres was in the province of Moray, in the heart of the Northern Pictish Kingdom. The stone denotes a stunning defeat. It is unlikely that the Picts were commemorating their being simply vanquished by the Scots, for Kenneth MacAlpin did actually gain the Pictish crown in the mid-9th century, about the time the stone was erected in Class III Pictish style. Neither can one imagine some Christian Picts signifying a victory over the Norsemen or Scots. The skill and thought that went into this monument are tremendous for there is no parallel in the British Isles. The Norse did not erect such memorials in Scotland but the Scots did, to judge from all the Class III stones that dot the landscape, but only as claims on royal hunting demesnes. This suggestion arises because of the numerous hunting scenes with horsemen and dogs, chasing deer. Such stones are peaceful and not warlike claims.

The Pictish kingdom of Fidach, later called Moray and Ross, stretched between the river Spey to the river Oykell and the Dornoch Firth. This province was fiercely independent. Its rulers may have been based at Craig Phadraig and Cawdor in the region of Inverness. It was a centre of the Northern Picts who opposed the Christian Southern Picts, south of the Mounth. Now, Macbeth was a Mormaer (Great Steward) of Moray who seized the Scottish throne in 1040 from the descendants of Kenneth MacAlpin. Macbeth's wife, Gruoch, was first married to Gillacomgain, Mormaer of Moray, the very man who killed Macbeth's father, Findlaech, also Mormaer of Moray. This internecine feuding among generations of noble Scots for power was, perhaps, a continuation of the older confrontations between the Picts. The point is that Moray was a thorn in the side of both the Pictish and Scottish kings at Scone. This could be a clue to the position and style of Sueno's stone.

If, as I suggest, the stone is now the wrong way round then that means that the execution scenes faced west towards the power centre of Moray — something that the men of Moray could contemplate and reflect upon —

while to the east, was triumphant Christendom. The actual site is probably close to where the battle depicted took place, below the old Pictish fort of Burghead.

I suggest that this stone was erected by Kenneth MacAlpin to tell the Picts *in their own symbolic code* that they were vanquished. Why should there be two execution scenes? Why are only 7 people beheaded each time? Why are groups of 4 so prevalent?

In 839 the Norsemen defeated the men of Southern Pictland and killed the Pictish king Eoganan (Uuen, son of Oengus), the last recorded king of the Picts. This gave Kenneth the chance he was looking for and he made a bid for the kingship. Legend has it that Kenneth invited the Pictish nobles to a 'peaceful and truceful' banquet at Scone and had them murdered — this is what is represented in the lower execution scene, under a tent, I believe. At that time there were 7 kingdoms of the Picts: 7 in the south and 7 in the north, each ruled over by a 'king'. What Kenneth had done in Scone was to murder the chiefs of the 7 royal Southern lineages. The corresponding panel on the cross-side (Fig.6.6) confirms this interpretation: two large figures, with acolytes, are bending over a defaced central figure with kilt (much like the central figure in panel B). Could this not be a coronation scene of Kenneth — his rivals now dispatched? What about the two elongated figures? As they are under the cross, they must be Christians but are they archangels, saints or bishops? I would like to suggest they personify the two protective saints of the Scots: St. Columba and St. Andrew. It is interesting to note that the cult of St. Andrew appears to have emerged in the reign of Oengus II and his family (820-834). His elder brother and predecessor was named Constantine (789-820), and this was the first time that the name was used in the Scottish royal line. Interestingly enough, it was also said that St Andrew's relics came from Constantinople under the reign of the Eastern Roman emperor Constantine. I also think that a sister of that very Oengus, who ruled as king of the Scots and of the Picts married that Alpin who was the father of Kenneth MacAlpin and so provided his matrilineal claim to the Pictish throne — all this happening in a period of just a dozen years. What better symbolic coronation could there be than the joint blessing of the defender of the old Scottish Christianity (St Columba) and the new defender of the Catholic Church (St Andrew)? If this suggestion is correct, I believe the left-hand figure and his *lower* acolyte is St. Columba while the right-hand figure with his *higher* acolyte is St. Andrew, reflecting the constant predominance of the right-hand in the symbolic representations on this stone.

Let us return to panel A. We have five, very badly-weathered figures: Kenneth, flanked by his four sub-kings, above 8 riders. These are opposed, on the other side, by the ring-cross — symbolizing the triumph of the *true* Christians, at the top.

Panel B repeats the beginning of panel A: Kenneth (in kilt) flanked by his sub-kings ruling above 22 of his men and a mere 12 opponents. There are 7 executed men — the 7 rulers of the Northern Picts, defeated in battle. What is most intriguing is the ‘bell’, ‘broch’ or ‘fort’ which lies in the *dead centre* of the entire monument. Clearly, this is a ceremonial execution of the prisoners — their hands are tied behind their backs. We can only guess what form of ceremony this was but it is not vital to discover this for what is absolutely certain is that this beheading denotes the fruitlessness of *ever* rebelling against the powers of Kenneth. Remember that this monument is a piece of political propaganda, backed up by the sanction of the united Christian churches. The opposite side shows the ‘rod’ of the cross defeating unbelievers!

This star-studded case of 98 actors with all its intricate interlace patterns was not meticulously carved by the Picts for their own glorification on this stupendous monument when they were about to be defeated. It is a *definitive statement about the end of a particular era* — the end of the dominance of the Pictish lineages in the royal line of succession to the kingdom of the *Picts*. There can only be *one* man for whom this was an all-important message: Kenneth MacAlpin, the first king of *both* the Picts and the Scots. Never since his day, with the exception of the eruption of the Mormaer of Moray Macbeth, has the throne been wrested from the successors of Kenneth. Who, then, other than Kenneth, would have erected such a forbidding statement to the potentially rebellious Pictish/Scottish lieges of Moray in the 9th century? If it was not Kenneth, the erection of such a gigantic monumental stone seems an utter mystery. My suggestions might help to dispel some of the questions about this superb stone — now at last protected from natural and socially-caused destructive elements.

These suggestions are put forward simply to provoke discussion and offer some *possible* alternative solutions as to why this very special Pictish Class III stone was ever erected *at Forres*. I cannot definitively prove my case but I hope the explanation is a plausible one which also fits the general thesis I have put forward elsewhere about the Picts and their world-view.

Bibliography

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